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ABSTRACT

This study used a qualitative approach in investigating one Finnish day care center, four Danish day care centers, and two Swedish day care centers. The study examined the "Nordic model" for day care, which is unique in that it combines education and care for children while parents are working. The study investigated the quality of education and the quality of life in these day care centers. The method of study was to follow each child by open observation for 2 to 3 hours each day. The research group constructed its own model of analysis for the children. Along with the observations, the day care staff was interviewed. The first focus of research was the object of children's activity and the object of role play during games, gymnastics, and other activities. Relations between children was the second area of concentration, including examining solitary activity, shared activity among children, and unequal relations. The third focus was observed relations between children and adults, including subject-subject relations and subject-object relations. Data showed that the concrete manifestations of quality appear in certain circumstances that can be related to the child's way of participating--being a source of the activity, a creative or a compliant participant--and to the type of relationship between the participants. The type of activity seems to be of minor importance since children find and create their own meaning in the activities, with the possibility of doing so being an important aspect of quality. (Contains 34 references.) (DCP)

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Maritta Hännikäinen, Marjanna de Jong, Lena Rubinstein Reich

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"Our heads are the same size!"
A study of quality of the child´s life in Nordic day care centres

Maritta Hännikäinen
Marjanna de Jong
Lena Rubinstein Reich

List of errata

p.5 line 7 from above: Danish Pedagogical Institute - should be: Danish National Institute for Educational Research

p.9 line 5 from above: Phillips (1987) - should be: Phillips et al. (1987)

p.39 line 15 from above: SusDina - should be: Susanna

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Preface

This is a report from the study "Quality in the child´s life in Nordic day care centres - a Nordic cooperative project". The study was carried through 1993-1996 by a group of researchers: Stig Broström, Royal Danish School of Educational Studies, Denmark; Maritta Hännikäinen, University of Tampere, Finland; Marjanna de Jong, University of Örebro, Sweden; Lena Rubinstein Reich, Malmö School of Education, Sweden; Sven Thyssen, Danish Pedagogical Institute, Denmark.

The research group was established in connection to a European collaborative project on early childhood education that was carried through in 1992-1994 under the auspices of CIDREE (Consortium of Institutions for Development and Research in Education in Europe). This collaborative project focused on involvement as an indicator for quality in early childhood care and education. The discussion within the CIDREE-group was the start for a Nordic study with the intention to produce a research-based description of the quality of children´s lives in Danish, Finnish and Swedish day care centres.

The research process included 13 joint group meetings, often in connection with Nordic and European conferences on early childhood education. In our meetings both theoretical and methodological issues were discussed, the research design was planned, collected data analysed and conclusions drawn. Our work was jointly published in the following reports:

Berg-de Jong, M., Broström, S., Hännikäinen, M., Rubinstein Reich, L. & Thyssen, S. (1993) *Quality of the child's life in Nordic day care centers. A Nordic cooperative project.* Reprints and Miniprints No. 795. Malmö, Sweden: School of Education.

Broström, S., Hännikäinen, M., de Jong, M., Rubinstein Reich, L. & Thyssen, S. (1996a) *Being a subject as an element of quality in day care centres.* Reprints and Miniprints No. 844. Malmö, Sweden: School of Education.

Broström, S., Hännikäinen, M., de Jong, M., Rubinstein Reich, L. & Thyssen, S. (1996b) The child's perspective - an extended view of what constitutes quality. In: Laevers, F. (Ed.) *An exploration of the concept of involvement as an indicator for quality in early child-*

hood care and education. CIDREE Volume 10. Dundee, Scotland: CIDREE, pp. 34-41.

Broström, S., Hännikäinen, M., de Jong, M., Rubinstein Reich, L. & Thyssen, S. (1996c) Notion de qualité, concepts fondamentaux: la qualité de vie du jeune enfant dans les structures d'accueil des pays nordiques. (Basic concepts in quality. Quality in the child's life in Nordic day care centres.) In: Rayna, S., Laevers, F. & Delau, M. (Eds.) *L'éducation préscolaire. Quels objectifs pédagogiques?* Paris: Nathan, pp. 217-234.

Also a Danish report was published, based on the joint work of the Nordic group:

Broström, S. & Thyssen, S. (1996) *Kvalitet i barnets liv i daginstitutionen. Et finsk, svensk, dansk forskningsprojekt.* Copenhagen: Danmarks Pædagogiske Institut.

The present report is also based on the joint work of the group. However the authors of this report are solely responsible for it, also for any inadequacies, misunderstandings and shortcomings.

We made the observations and interviews for our study in one Finnish day care centre (päiväkoti), four Danish day care centres (børnehave) and two Swedish day care centres (daghem). We would like to thank all the children and staff who willingly let us come into their day care centres to make observations and interviews. Because of using pseudonyms we are sorry that we cannot thank everybody by name.

We also would like to express our gratitude for the economic support we recieved during the study from: The Danish National Federation of Early Childhood Education (BUPL), Denmark; Helsingin Sanomain 100-vuotissäätiö, Finland; Herman and Hilma Siegvald´s fund, Sweden; Kari Kairamon muistorahasto/VOLVO AB, Finland; Letterstedtska Föreningen/-Suomen osasto, Finland; Letterstedtska Föreningen, Sweden; Socialministeriet (Ministry of Social Affairs), Denmark.

Finally we want to thank our colleagues in the CIDREE group for valuable discussions, and especially Stig and Sven for our joint work.

Malmö, 26th of February 1997

Maritta Hännikäinen Marjanna de Jong Lena Rubinstein Reich

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Points of departure

The 'Nordic model' for day care

In recent years, the educational quality in day care centres and other institutions for small children has been increasingly discussed in many European countries and other parts of the world. In this discussion, attention is often turned to the Nordic countries and the special 'Nordic model' of child care.

Therefore there is reason to take a closer look at what quality consists of in Nordic day care centres ('børnehave' in Denmark, 'päivähoti' in Finland and 'daghem' in Sweden) and its 'central core'. Nordic day care combines care for children while parents are working, and education. In this way, early childhood education in the Nordic countries differs from that in most other Western European countries. For the majority of children under school age in the Nordic countries, the setting of early childhood education is the day care centre.

Early childhood education in most of the European countries is described through a curriculum and academic subjects like mathematics and science. In the Nordic tradition play and aesthetics are seen as central contents. Besides focusing on a given content and a special theme attention is paid to interpersonal relations and the general social situation is ascribed the same importance as academic subjects.

One of our articles (Broström et al. 1996b, pp. 35-36) gives an example of a painting session in a day care centre. The example shows a setting that may well be typical in Nordic day care. The activity is characterized by not focusing exclusively on a single task. On the contrary, several different processes are going on simultaneously: the children are singing, discussing and painting, the latter being part of the project of making a town from milk cartons. The social relations of the group are taken into consideration by the adults. A newly arrived child is introduced into the work group with the use

of a song. The children practice taking turns and waiting for their turn to use certain colours, and at the same time they are discussing a fantasy figure, Zorro, which seems to be of great importance to them. Thus, the setting is characterized by the multidimensionality of processes, each of which can be said to have different aims.

From the perspective of the educator, the planned educational activity of making the town may be most important. From the perspective of a child it could be most important to be part of the fantasy world with Zorro, to be part of the group, or to be accepted as a person. By participating in the children's discussions, jokes and songs, the staff shows their respect for the children. Another, more narrow way of looking at the ongoing activity, might have led to criticism of the children who are not showing enough involvement in their task, or of the staff's lack of effort to stimulate them to concentrate on the task of painting.

From quality of education to quality of life

Research on the quality of day care in itself is not a new topic. It is, in fact, a classic theme in research on early childhood education. In general, there is a growing interest in creating and using rating scales in order to measure the educational quality (Ekholm & Hedin 1990). For instance, Pascal (1993) has formulated a series of dimensions to assess quality. The dimensions concern aims and goals, curriculum, teaching style, style of being together, planning of activity, assessment of activity, staffing, the physical environment, relations and interaction and egalitarianism according to gender and race. The child's involvement in the activity also is considered to be a central indicator of quality (e.g., Laevers 1994).

Various factors have served as indicators of quality, such as quantitative factors (e.g., the size of child groups or the ratio between children and staff), financial and material aspects (e.g., the standard of equipment and facilities), quality of staff (e.g., level of teacher training) and curricular or didactic arrangements. A Swedish study showed that the staff's agreement

concerning the educational goals was more crucial for quality than the number of educators (Hägglund & Palmérus 1987). Studies from Bermuda and Pennsylvania demonstrated a relation between the leader's experience and the children's development of social competence (Kontos & Feine 1987; Phillips 1987). A Nordic study, the aim of which was to describe modern childhood in the Nordic countries showed, among other things, that what attracts the child to the day care centre is the possibility to "be a child among other children in the group", while "the enthusiasm the child shows is related to the opportunity to play with other children" (Langsted & Haavind 1993, p. 69). For an overview of research on quality in day care see, e.g. Kärrby (1992) and Phillips (1987).

In summary, previous studies of quality have mainly focused on specific aspects assumed to be of importance for the quality of early childhood education. Some studies have been directed at motivation, commitment, achievement, abilities and mastery. Others have been directed at describing dimensions of quality as a tool for measuring and comparing centres.

The understanding of the concept of quality and how to study quality are influenced by different traditions of early childhood education. From our Nordic perspective we raised a number of questions: Can quality really be estimated when only some of the dimensions are studied? Are some dimensions more important than others? Do they include quality of life?

A problem in previous studies is that single dimensions are regarded as independent from each other. Moreover, there has been a tendency to ignore the individual's own activity and reflection. Our scepticism about using a fixed scale to measure quality conducted us in another direction. We used the child's own contribution and endeavour to create quality in his or her life as our point of departure. We refrained from making an attempt to produce a general definition of quality in education but committed ourselves to a more concrete search for quality in the child's life in day care centres.

From the child´s point of view, the social process may be just as important as the cognitive process. When judging quality, the child´s perspective, the object of the ongoing activity, the development of social

relations in the setting, as well as involvement, have to be taken into account. Therefore, our main aim is to gain a broader understanding of quality in early childhood education. We regard quality not only as a practical or educational but also as a theoretical and methodological problem. Thus, another aim of the project was to produce theoretical tools to illuminate and analyse quality of children's life through observations of children's life in selected day care centres in Denmark, Finland and Sweden. With our contribution we wish to add new aspects to the concept of quality, and join the general discussion on quality of life and education. Finally we hope that our work will form a basis for raising new questions serving the development of early childhood education.

Quality of life

A theory about quality must be built upon an understanding of both objective conditions and subjective experiences of life, which are referred to in the concept of 'quality of life'. But well-being, prosperity and a meaningful life are also results of the individual's life process, where he or she is an active participant.

In our view, the human being is at every moment of life involved in creating or changing his or her world and culture, and thereby him- or herself, together with other individuals. The individual is a subject, an agent in this process, contributing to it by his or her activity. For children, the process consists, for instance, of play where they are subjects and active agents in creating their own culture. Valsiner (1988, p. ix) expressed this in the following way: "The developing child is an active participant in his or her own social development. He or she is one of the agents in the social framework that organizes his or her own social development." Accordingly, we assume that quality of life is related to whether the individual is an active agent in the social life processes of which he or she is a part, or whether he or she is merely an object in life processes which are determined by others.

Lewin (1935) used the term 'life space' when referring to the world of the individual. The life space contains things and human beings, appearing with positive or negative valences, expressing forces and barriers. Lewin's concept of life space might, however, be extended and generalized. Although the life spaces of individuals may differ, people create a common life space which contains things with meanings, values and relationships like friendships, togetherness and love. The life space undergoes a constant change in the course of human activity. New objects, meanings, values and relationships appear.

An activity-theoretical viewpoint

The cultural-historical activity theory states that relations between individuals and between individuals and objects are mediated through activity. Activities take place in a broader social and societal setting, where special meanings are ascribed to objects and acts in accordance with culture.

According to Leontiev (1978, p. 50), activity as a general concept refers to "a molar, not an additive unit of the life of the physical, material subject". Activity is a large unit segment of the total 'life stream'. Activity is realized by concrete individuals and takes place either when the subject deals with the surrounding world of objects as an individual or together with other people.

Davydov (1993, p. 50) defines activity as a "specific species of human societal existence which aims at a goal-directed change of physical and social reality". In consequence, with all its varied forms, activity is created within a societal and cultural context. According to Leontiev (1974-75, 1978) the activity of individuals is determined by the forms and means of material and mental social interaction created by the development of production. Each activity of an individual answers to a specific motive which includes the subject's activity and gives it the direction.

In children's joint activity, or in activities where both children and

educators participate, the activity of each participant may look the same but is not necessarily the same, since there can be differing meanings, differing goals and differing motives. Yet there can be shared understanding. However, too much difference between the meanings, goals and motives of the child and those of the educator may cause misunderstanding and may hinder the educator in supporting the child's development.

Objects of the activity, interpersonal relations and manifestations of quality

Individuals are related to each other through object-oriented activities. In the process of their life the adult and the child change the object, together and for each other. The object is changed, it acquires new functions, and thereby becomes a basis for new activities. This is also stressed by Leontiev (1978, p. 53) who points out that when the individual acts, the activity brings about changes both at the pole of the subject and at the pole of the object of the activity. Such being the case, the following questions arise: Through which objects do persons relate? What are the characteristics of the object? Does it have the same characteristics for the child and for the adult? How are the objects changed in the course of ongoing activity? And finally, do all individuals involved in the activity have the same opportunities to contribute to its course?

We are aware that human development as well as human activity forms a unit, where different aspects of the whole can be separated from each other only artificially, for instance, for the use of research. We developed a conceptual model - mainly based on the activity theory - which allows us to consider both single aspects of an activity and the relations between them as well as interpersonal relations. The model also allows us to take account of the child´s perspective.

Making judgements of quality demands definitions of how quality is manifested concretely, both in activities and interpersonal relations. As positive manifestations of quality we regard the child's commitment,

absorption, fascination and involvement as well as his or her happiness, friendliness, liveliness, kindness and interest in other people (Broström et al. 1996a, p. 5), although there might be others, too. Some of these we expected to find through this study.

Design of the study

In accordance with our qualitative approach and aims of the study we decided to observe only a small number of children in a few day care centres. Seven day care centres were included in the study: four in Denmark, one in Finland and two in Sweden. The chosen day care centres were considered to be of good quality but otherwise they did not have any special features separating them from ordinary day care centres in the respective countries. The target children were chosen intentionally. All the children observed were around five years old. Another criterium was to include both boys and girls who were regularly present at the day care centre.

The day care centres and the children observed

The following day care centres were observed:

Sommerfugl, Denmark

Sommerfugl was a six year old day care centre with 72 children aged 2 - 5 years and a staff of 6 educators and 6 assistants (not educated staff). Most of the children lived near the centre but because of a good reputation of the centre some travelled a bit every morning. The parents belonged to upper middle class. The centre was divided in two age mixed sections. However, in accordance with an educational principle the children moved around and they themselves decided where to be and play. The adults stayed close to the children and made observations in order to understand the children and their needs. In accordance with that they also initiated activities, from which the children could choose themselves. One child, Sanne, was observed, in total seven hours and 30 minutes.

Mariehøne, Denmark

The day care centre was 15 years old and situated in the middle of several residential neighbourhoods with middle class families. In the centre there were 40 children and 7 adults, of which 4 were educators. The children were aged between 3 and 5 years and were divided into two groups. To each group two educators and one assistant were attached. However, the children moved around both indoors and outdoors, and like this all children and adults were in close connection. Often the adults planned activities and carried them into effect, sometimes as a joint activity like song, music and rhythmics or an excursion into the forrest or the town. But most of the time the children planned their own activities. Three children were observed. Bent was observed in total three hours and 10 minutes, Marcus seven hours and 30 minutes and Mille six hours and 55 minutes.

Solbæret, Denmark

The Solbæret was situated in a separate pavillion with a play ground and a green area. It is an institution for children 0 - 6-year-olds. There were 38 children aged 3 - 6 years divided into two groups. The staff included 5 educators, one of whom was also head of the institution, and 2 assistants. Three children were observed. Peter was observed in total six hours, Rie five hours and 45 minute and Tine six hours.

Hindbæret, Denmark

The day care centre was situated in an apartment with three rooms and a kitchen. It had its own play ground. There were 20 children aged 2 - 6 years, divided into two groups. The staff included 3 educators, one assistant and one trainee. An educator for children with special needs was also temporarily employed at the centre when the observations were made. Two children were observed. Sten was observed in total six hours and Stine six hours.

Pääskylä, Finland

The day care centre was an old wooden house, unpractical but homely with

many small rooms and corners. The building was divided into two departments, one with children aged 1 - 4 and the other one with children aged 5 - 6, the total number of children was 40. The staff included 4 teachers, 2 nursery nurses, one trainee and one cook. During the the observation time some kindergarten teacher students were doing their practice in the centre. Compared to an average centre this one had probably less strict daily schedules. The centre was working with broad main themes taking also account of the seasons. The children could use almost the whole building for their activities, they could play also in the office and the entrance halls. Because the rooms were high also two lofts were built to be used by the children. According to the staff the children´s points of view were emphasised and the children were seen as active members of the group with their own will, ideas and plans. Two children were observed. Henna was observed in total six hours and 10 minutes, Olli in total five hours and 50 minutes.

Ekorren, Sweden

The day care centre was situated in the centre of a city, in the bottom floor of an apartment building. The children were divided into two groups, one group with 15 children aged 1 - 4 and one group with 22 children aged 3 - 7. The staff consisted of two pre-school teachers working full-time, two preschool teachers part-time and one assistant. One of the pre-school teachers main task was to assist a child with special needs. The main goal according to the staff was to make the children socially competent, to be able to cooperate and at the same time independant. Another objective was to provide intellectual stimulation and motor development. The staff also stressed the importance for the children to be happy and have fun while being at the day care centre. Three children were observed. Carina was observed in total one hour and 30 minutes, Fanny in total six hours and 15 minutes and Oskar in total six hours and five minutes.

Kaninen, Sweden

The centre was located in a neighbourhood with a large number of

immigrants, at the outskirts of a medium sized town. The centre had four departments for a total of 60 children in different age categories (1 - 3, 3 - 5 and 5 - 7). Each department had a part of the building as its domain. The spaces for staff were shared and the kitchen served all departments. Half of the children did not have Swedish as their mother tongue which of course influenced the work in the centre. The staff aimed at a multicultural way of working with the children, focusing on creative, aesthetic activities and Swedish language. The department where observations were made was for 16 children. It contained a large room for motoric play and circle time, a room for meals, games and play, a small carpentry, a room for quiet play, a hall and a toilet room. Two children were observed. Marta was observed in total six hours and 30 minutes and Pelle in total six hours and 25 minutes.

Observations, interviews and methods of analysis

We applied the method of following a single child by open observation. The point of departure in this type of observation is to describe the child's activities as an ongoing process. Every child was observed during three days, each day about two hours. Two hours was considered as a minimum time period to follow the development of a situation and the shift from one situation to another. The times of observation were chosen to cover different parts of the day: outdoor and indoor activities, routine activities, structured activities and free play activities. During the single observation periods the aim was to capture the mode of the activity, what the target child did alone and what he or she did in interaction with other children and adults. Sometimes there was a problem to observe when the children were in a small room and obviously did not like to be followed. In some cases the child could be seen but not heard because of noise.

In order to reach a common way of making observations, pilot observations were made by all of us. They were transcribed and discussed to establish a shared methodology. At the same time analytic concepts were constructed. We also used two videotaped sequences of activities from a

Danish day care centre in order to develop a model of analysis. In this way we trained ourselves as observers and reached an agreement about our role in the day care centre, before the observations for the study were made.

The observations were transcribed and all the Finnish observations were translated into English, so they could be read and used by all the researchers. The written descriptions served as raw material. To analyse the material we applied an interpretive approach (c.f. Corsaro 1985).

The role of the observer we chose can be described as reactive and mainly non-participant. We answered the children´s questions and helped them sometimes when they required so. Most often we told them that we could not play because we had to write down what they were doing. An example of this comes from Finland:

> Henri asks MARITTA and RAIJA (observers): "What do you write?"
> MARITTA tells that they are writing about the activities in the day care centre.
> Henri: "Why?"
> MARITTA: "We are writing because later we would not be able to remember what we had seen."
> The children did not ask anything more as if the matter no longer was of any interest to them.

In addition to observations, also interviews were made with the staff in all day care centres making use of criteria of quality developed by Pascal and Bertram (e. g. 1991, see also Pascal 1993). The purpose was to get a background description of the work in the centres as well as judgement of how typical the observed periods were. Furthermore, some target children were interviewed in order to get a better understanding and interpretations of the situations observed. However, the children sometimes did not remember the specific situations afterwards and as a result the discussions with children were more general. For this reason the information gained through these interviews could not be optimally used.

As a tool of analysis we developed a model which contains our basic points of departure, objects and interpersonal relations:

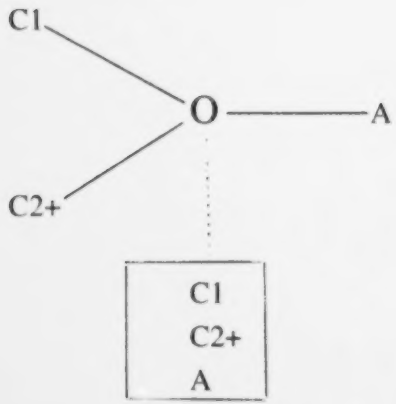

Figure 1. C1 is one child and C2+ is another or more children, O is the object and A is the adult. The object seen from the perspective of different participants is illustrated by the box.

The model was used to analyse the examples and to interprete the different kinds of object and interpersonal relations of the target child, the other children and the adults. The examples used in this report are taken from the total collection of our observations. Almost all kinds of objects, interpersonal relations and concrete manifestations of quality could be found and recognised by the observers in a diversity of settings. Thus they are not merely a finding emanating from the mind and the experience of only one researcher.

Our observations are presented in three chapters. One chapter presents different kinds of activities with different types of objects. The analysis shows that also interpersonal relations can be objects of the activity. Different types of interpersonal relations are discussed more thoroughly in the following two chapters. In order to show the variety of activities, objects and interpersonal relations we had to deal with them separately but in the final chapter we present an example that combines them.

Object of the activity

The concept of object

From the activity-theoretical viewpoint the concept of object is central and raises continuous discussion.[1] Engeström (1993) reminds us that the concept refers to both *object as a 'given raw material'* and to *object as 'objective' or mentally constructed image of the outcome* to be achieved. It is this dialectic between object as externally given, and object as something to be aimed at by the subject, that makes it an interesting concept (for a broader discussion, see Engeström 1990).

A physical object (Gegenstand) as an object belongs to the group of 'given raw material'. It refers to a thing 'an sich' (e.g. a stone, a ball, a doll) or to a thing as a tool or mediator for an activity. A doll is a physical thing, but when a child treats a doll as a living person the doll may signify a baby that is taken care of. Here the object 'doll' acts as a pivot for the real object, baby (c.f. Vygotsky 1976, pp. 546-548). Object in this sense can also be something non-material which means *an idea as an object*. An example of this might be, for instance, in play, an imagined plate with imagined food.

Regarding *object as a tool* not all tools are physical things. Very often mediating tools are symbolic like language, gestures and mime. When speaking of mediation, we must not forget, that before the child acts on his or her own he or she acts in direct cooperation with an adult. Thus the meaning and function of the object of activity is mediated by the relation to another person.

An action or activity as an object could be ranked in the same category as 'a physical thing as an object'. Different actions with or without physical things can also be seen as a kind of object in the sense of *content of the*

[1] Here, the discussion in xact-network in the year 1993.

activity. We could ask a child playing with a doll what he or she is doing and might get the answer: "I feed my baby." The object of the activity then is feeding the baby.

When two children are playing or singing together, the ongoing activity is the object. Here we could perhaps speak of *a collective object* or even *a collective subject*. This kind of collective object can be constructed by the children together, or it can be initiated by one child or an adult and accepted by the other participants. Of course the children and the adult together can share the object. A collective object could be, for instance, to have a peaceful, quiet moment together.

The *object can also be mental activity*, for instance, to develop ideas or plans. Here, it is difficult for the observer to interpret the object since it is invisible. When a child is not involved in an activity planned by the adult, we may think the child is doing nothing. Yet, he or she might be concentrated in thinking, developing ideas and reflecting on his or her own thoughts and feelings. Thus, *a person as an object for him- or herself* could be seen as a special case of the invisible object. For instance, the child sees him- or herself and attaches importance to being seen.

By the definition of the object as ´objective´ we come to *the object as a motive of activity*. An activity is connected with motives and needs (Leontiev 1978, pp. 62-63). The question "by what is a person motivated?", or rather "why do people do something?" ought to be asked and answered here. An activity always has an object and there is no activity without a motive (Leontiev 1978, pp. 62-63). In order to answer the question "why do people do something?", we also must know what the action is about.

And, finally, it is necessary to discuss what the *needs, objects and motives* have to do with each other. When looking for an answer, we could, for instance, ask: "what needs are fulfilled with the actions or activity a person is involved in"? Leontiev (1974-1975, p.13) explains that a full personal motive is generated, or emerges by itself, when a need meets an object.

When we discuss *the object of an activity in the day care centre*, the angle is mainly the target child´s perspective. What does the child do and

why does he or she do that? We must also take account of the different activities taking place in the day care centre. The dominant activity of the children might be play, especially role play and games. However, a significant part of the children´s day in day care consists of adult initiated, structured activities like circle time, gymnastics and aesthetics as well as routines like mealtimes, resting and naps, dressing and undressing. And the children also work: they lay the table, make beds and tidy up their play things. What kind of objects, especially in the sense of *contents* and *motives*, are to be seen in these activities?

Object of role play

Play forms a considerable amount of children´s activities in the day care centre. In role play the imaginative constitutes the central point and also gives the play its content. It is only in the fantasy of the children that a doll is a baby and they themselves are pirates fighting a formidable battle. The children´s contact with tools and other play material, their movements and concrete facial expressions are all subordinated to the play idea and imagination (see Elkonin 1980).

In order to vitalize their imagination the children solve problems which contribute to creating a scenery which makes the play come alive. The pirates use shovels as weapons. Sand or stones constitute bombs. A boy becomes a robot when putting a pail on his head and carrying shovels in his hands. Through play the child sees new properties in the things. He or she sees the weapon in the shovel. Conventional things become transformed and appear with new meanings. In this way the child also in his or her mind constructs new models and sceneries of things.

In role play, the child sees new characteristics in him- or herself. In an imaginary situation the child sees him- or herself as a pirate, a mother or a police officer. Thus, on the imaginative level, play brings about social properties and characteristics, which the child does not have on the concrete level. By means of play the child may look at him- or herself as a person he

or she would like to be or who displays characteristics that he or she would like to have. The child experiences this person from inside by having his or her emotions and efforts. The child assumes this person´s attitudes and values, experiences his or her life situation and performs actions making the concerned attitudes and values real.

The main object of play is just playing. The contents of play can be divided into two main groups of play themes. One is concerned with a dramatic situation including dangerous or exciting events with fighters, policemen and fantasy figures like Zorro, Power Rangers or Biker mice from Mars. This seems to be typical for five-year-old boys. The other group of play themes deals with family life. These themes are typical for girls. The following example illustrates the first group:

Three girls are sailing in the boat in the play ground.
Stine: "Please, could you hold the rope so the boat does not sail?"
Helene jumps off the boat and holds the rope.
Stine: "But we will be sailing in five minutes."
Helene gets the Dannebrog (the flag of Denmark) for the sternpost of the boat. An ADULT helps her to carry the mast with the pirate´s flag to the boat.
Stine, solemnly: "And the pirate´s flag must also be run up, the Danish pirates!"
Stine: "Now we have let go the moorings."
Sten and Simon arrive.
They grab a pushcart and ask Stine: "Do you need this one?"
Stine: "No, I think the one inside the house uses it."
Sten pulls it away and says: "Oh."
Stine: "We will leave now!"
She grabs the flagstaff with the Dannebrog, stands waving the flag and shouts: "And a bottle of rhummm."
She waves on and explains to the girls: "That was because otherwise the boat would not sail properly."
Stine: "Now we are not pirates anymore."
Sten and Simon join them saying: "But we are pirates."
Stine: "Hoist the flag (...) We need weapons."
Stine, Simon and Sten run for shovels. Stine returns to the boat fast. There is excitement in the air. Stine takes a shovel.
Sten: "We shall pull your hair."
A fencing match with the shovels is developing. The boys stand beside the boat, the girls are inside the boat.
In chorus headed by Stine the girls say: "Don´t do that... don´t do

that... don´t do that!"
The girls express a strong feeling of unity while they defeat the boys. The boys withdraw and go into the adjoining play house together.
Stine: "They will probably make a plan but we have plenty of mud."
Sten: "We have sand bombs."
They start to throw sand at the girls.
The girls fight back by shoveling wet sand on the boys while shouting: "Don´t do that."
The boys realize that the battle is lost. Sten asks if they can have some of the leaves in the boat since they are fishes and the battle is terminated. Sten climbs into the boat and walks towards the pirate´s flag. Without talking about it the girls accept the boys´ boarding the boat.
(...)
Sten to Stine: "You are a robot."
Sten, Simon and Stine talk with robot-voices: "I-will-go-into-the-water-and-look-for-some-treasures".
Stine: "So-will-I."
The boys start to collect provisions. Simon returns to the boat dressed as a robot with pails and shovels on his head and in his hands.
Stine calls out to Sten: "Come-on-robot-come-on."
A little later she shouts: "Try out the cannon!"
She waves the flag and sings: "Olé, olé, olé!"

This play is not only a reproduction of themes from the surrounding culture. The play in itself is a unique process in which the children give concrete and new forms to values and attitudes, contained in the culture of which they are a part. The decisive part seems to be the drama which is created and the dramatic expression which play allows. The children do not strive to create a correct picture of the pirate´s life. They deal with that which creates a lively and dramatic situation and emphasize the dramatic expression. New ideas otherwise quite distant from the pirate´s reality, such as the robot theme, are allowed to become part of the play as long as it brings life to the situation.

The next example brings us to the family theme:

Rie fetches a small carrycot and some pillows and puts them on a table.
Rie: "Dina, you are going to lie in it."
Dina tries to crawl into it. Rie also fetches a teddy bear. Lis helps tucking in Dina and wraps something around her. Pernille sits on the

table watching.
Rie watches Dina, strokes her head protruding from a petticoat and says: "Dina, she has just been born."
Dina whimpers a little like a baby. Rie takes a jumping gadget. She tries it and walks over to Dina, the baby, giving it to her. She also fetches a teddy bear.
Rie: "Dina should have this one, she is little."
A little later Rie comes over to Mie, who is sitting on the floor with wooden train tracks. Rie wants to borrow Mie´s hair band.
Mie says: "Ok, then Dina shall borrow it, too."
Rie admits and she gets it. Then she takes a telephone.
When going back to the others she says: "Here comes father with a telephone."
Rie comes over to Mie again: "Mie, do you want to be Dina´s grandmother, then she will come in seven days?"
Mie nods.

The caring aspect in a family theme gets a special emphasis when the play includes young animals:

Tine: "I was a small kitten and I did not want food, I only wanted milk."
Nadja: "But were you not giving birth?"
Tine: "Yes, when I grew up I gave birth."
Tine lies down on the cushion and squeaks like a very small kitten.
Tine: "But I was far too small to get outdoors."
Tine picks up a toy tiger from the floor: "Who is the smallest of these two, me or the tiger?"
Nadja: "You are."
Gitte: "You had already had a little baby."
Tine: "No, for I am still a small kitten... for I haven´t had a baby and I have no husband and then I have no one to make love with."
Tine picks up a doll from the floor and puts it under a doll´s cover.
Tine: "And then I laid myself to sleep as I wanted to."
Tine lies down on the cushion next to the doll.
She says in a brittle, cute voice: "I was ever so small ... then I wanted to go out into the garden and pick flowers for you."
Gitte brings a small bowl which she places in front of her and asks sweetly: "Do you want a little milk?"
Tine: "There was no more in it."
Gitte fetches a small jar and holds the milk in front of Tine: "Do you want milk? Do you want milk?"
Tine: "You said that in cat-language."
Gitte nods and puts the bowl in front of Tine.

Nadja says hopingly while looking at Tine: "Now we shall soon have kittens."
Tine replies: "No, for I have no husband."
Nadja begs earnestly: "But I do so want some kittens."
Tine replies definitively but kindly: "But I don´t want a husband now. Why don´t we say that I am not a grown lady yet?"
Nadja says a litte low-spirited: "Okey."
Gitte: "Who will help mummy? One of our babies is ill."
Tine gets with it: "Then we realized that I was ill and then we fetched the doctor - the cat doctor."

The themes in the children´s play originate from the children´s direct private experience like from their life as a family member, and from cultural material. The latter concerns, for instance, fairy-tales, TV programmes and toys.

Role play may span a long time. It can begin in the morning, be interrupted by the circle time and resumed after that. This applies to Tine´s baby kitten play. Yet, often play themes are only indicated and never developed. A number of play themes may be introduced within a short span of time, each one to become developed only a little and then left again in favour of a new one.

When the children play they create a character possessing some general personality traits like in fairytales, stories and songs. In the pirate play persons are fighting, winning and loosing, and looking for treasures. In the baby play the child is tiny and needs to be tucked in softly and comfortably. The figure is displayed in such a way that it provokes taking care of the tiny creature and looking after it. The children stress the ´cute´, fragile and care demanding features by talking about a ´kitten´ even though it sometimes has the character of a human baby. In this way the play deals with the personality, attitudes, values and their realization.

But the object of role play is not only play itself. In their play the children also reflect on many questions of existential nature. They may, for instance, discuss birth, ageing and death. Sometimes they do it seriously and joking at the same time, sometimes really thinking the matter over and showing an interest in understanding the world. In their play they develop ideas, make

analyses and seek knowledge about the more concrete sides of their world. They also attempt to master skills corresponding to their acquired knowledge. For instance, the children include their knowledge of and interest in reading and writing in their play:

> Sten gets a bag from the girls, opens it and looks inside it. He takes out a small battery-operated piano.
> He says: "Now I will play."
> The piano has only a few keys. Probably that is why Sten puts it away and takes a book out of the bag. He puts the book besides him and picks up the piano again. Vibeke takes the book and begins to turn the pages.
> Sten: "Don´t do that."
> Vibeke puts the book down.
> The other girl, Tina, who is a little younger asks: "What are we actually playing ... what are we actually playing ... what are we playing? Are we playing cops?"
> Vibeke replies: "Of course we do. Then you stand over there."
> She points to the small house beside the boat.
> Sten is sitting engrossed and importantly turning the pages of a used spiral bound calendar book. In one hand he holds a shiny green pencil. He turns the leaves, puts the pencil in his mouth, turns the pages again as if reading and writing in a calendar.
> Tina asks again: "Where do I stand?"
> Vibeke and Sten do not reply. Vibeke sits looking solemnly at Sten. She does not want to disturb him. Sten puts away the calendar and picks up a comic paper. He turns the pages as if reading. Vibeke picks up the calendar and the pencil and turns the pages a little.
> Vibeke: "I was just going to write something."
> Sten replies: "No, you were not going to write anything."
> He takes the calendar out of Vibeke´s hands.

First and foremost, both play and seeking knowledge are activities on which the children focus their initiative and in which they seem to feel well. It seems that almost all children aim at these activities. However, these activities also include situations where conflicts and bad atmosphere between the children occur and sometimes even dominate and where the concrete manifestations of quality are missing.

Summarizing we can say that there are two general traits in role play. The first one is that it is essential to be an active person, having strength and

representing something which evokes respect. The second one is that human relations are important, especially illustrated by giving and receiving love and care.

Object in other activities

Games

Playing games, constructive activities, and making puzzles frequently occur in day care centres. They are activities where often several children of the same or mixed ages participate. They give opportunities for social learning, such as turn taking, following rules, being patient and win or loose. They also permit intellectual learning such as counting, learning numbers, seeing differences, memorizing and being concentrated. This kind of activity is often started on the initiative of the children themselves. Sometimes they play on their own, sometimes the adults participate. And sometimes games and constructive play change into role play.

Our examples are of games. The first one shows a rather simple scene, where some girls are playing memory when the target child comes and wants to join. The duration of the episode is about half an hour:

> Fanny walks towards a table where Sissie and Cornelia are playing memory. Fanny watches what the girls do and asks if she can join. The girls do not answer. Fanny stands at the corner of the table. She sits down on a chair, then goes down from the chair, a bit hesitant, and sits on it again.
> Cornelia says to her in a nudgy tone: "That is my place."
> Fanny climbs around and sits down on a chair by the wall. She holds a turtle in her arms and looks at the girls that are playing. She points at one of the cards, looks and points at the matching card that should be turned.
> She continues to watch the game until Cornelia says: "I won."
> Fanny: "My turtle can also join."
> She caresses the turtle with her hand.
> Now Fanny is allowed to join and play memory with Sissie and Cornelia, they deal out the cards.
> Sissie: "Fanny may start."

Fanny: "Another time I could and then you did it."
Fanny turns the cards. "Your turn, Sissie."
Sissie: "Fanny!" (meaning it is Fanny´s turn´).
The girls play for a while, Fanny sits quietly and silently and waits for her turn, looking concentrated.
Sissie: "I have almost just as many as you."
Fanny: "I have most."
They discuss whose turn it is. Fanny turns the cards.
Sissie says to Fanny: "Now we have just as many."
Cornelia: "I have most."
Fanny, irritated: "I know."
There are no cards left on the table. The girls measure each others´ piles with cards.
"We play once more!"
Sissie mixes the cards and puts them down on the table. Fanny looks at some children who are sitting at a table next to them. They play one more game.
Cornelia says to Sissie: "For you are my best friend."
Near by some boys fight and start crying. Fanny, Cornelia and Sissie seem undisturbed and continue playing.
Fanny: "It is your turn."
Natalie wins with a large margin. Fanny hugs her turtle tenderly and watches when Sissie and Cornelia compare who has won.
Natalie: "I won."
Fanny, somewhat irritated: "Yes."
Fanny looks a little angry and puts out the cards.
Fanny: "I don´t remember."
The girls continue to play. Fanny looks at her pair of cards.
Cornelia says to Sissie: "You should not do it in that way."
Fanny does not succeed so well, she only has one pair of cards. She looks at her cards. Now it is her turn and she succeeds in getting several pairs.
Cornelia to Sissie: "Shall we play with the wild boy?"
Sissie: "When we have finished."
Cornelia: "Look so many Fanny is getting."
Cornelia to Sissie: " She can play."
Fanny: "I have taken, now it is your turn, Sissie."
It seems like mostly Sissie and Cornelia are together, not Fanny.
Sissie: "We don´t play anymore."
Cornelia: "It is so boring."
Fanny leans back in her chair, holding her turtle.
Cornelia to Fanny: "You should not just leave."
Fanny: "But I did not take it."
Cornelia: "One should not leave one´s friends."
Fanny goes out into the hall alone, takes a pram and plays with it.

The memory game is played by girls of the same age, the conditions for understanding the game and for winning are more or less equal. Fanny wants to join and asks if she can. Her object is to play the game, to participate, to be part of the group. The other girls do not answer, Fanny is not accepted. The object of the girls is to keep their game going, but they do not say this clearly to Fanny, instead they just do not answer. The girls seem to follow a rule about playing games, which says that you finish the game you have started upon and that newcomers should wait until the new game starts before they can join. This helps to keep the existing group together.

Fanny stays, she sits down, she has the same objects as before. The girls tell her she cannot sit there, it is not her place. The object of Cornelia here is to demonstrate power, by using rules of ownership. She shows dominance by not accepting Fanny in the group.

After some time the first game is finished, Fanny is accepted in the group and she joins the game. She is allowed to start. The object of the girls is to show Fanny that she is now accepted. The game goes on. There is a fight between some boys but the girls pay no attention. They have isolated themselves from what goes on in other places in the centre.

First Cornelia and Sissie win or at least Fanny looses. They play several times. Later, when Fanny does better in the game the other girls want to quit, they think the game is boring. The object is not just to play, it is also to win. When Fanny leans back, she is reproached for leaving the game, the others are telling her about the rules. This is also an expression of dominance. The object is to reinforce the tie between Cornelia and Sissie.

The collective object is to play the game, to follow the rules, to compare, to compete, to win. Accepting to loose is to accept reality. This is difficult and it gives sadness. The object can be consciousness of the rules of life. In this situation, Fanny learns to handle disappointment, unpleasant situations and also sportsmanship. Another object is showing affection, confirming friendship, strengthening the group. But this is only expressed between two of the girls, Cornelia and Sissie, it is not directed towards the whole group.

The next episode shows how the children engage in a shared activity with

a collective object. This object is not winning the game but playing the game. At the same time the children discuss and teach each other the rules:

> Olli to Juuso: "Let´s be rascals."
> They begin to run around until they are in the hall. There they stop and begin to look at Juhani and Pauli who are playing "corona."
> Juhani and Pauli play, Olli and Juuso are looking at the game.
> (...)
> Olli: "I encourage both."
> Pauli: "The most important is to participate."
> Pauli and Juhani get into a dispute about the rules.
> The boys explain and argue: "The rules are determining, not we."

The children show their concern about the rules of the game. The rules can be either absolute or relative and can be changed. Sometimes the adult is needed to clarify the possibility of having different perspectives and aims with the game:

> Ivar makes a comment to INGRID about how Lisa plays the game.
> Lisa replies something.
> INGRID says: "Sometimes you have to leave those who play alone, perhaps they have made up rules of their own, we don't know that."

In summary, games are about accepting rules and following them, thereby subordinating oneself to the group. A game can be played for the fun of playing, but also with the aim of winning. This is clear to the children but they handle the issue of winning and loosing in different ways. The social process of participation, negotiating and having fun together, is just as important as cognitive aspects.

Circle time

Circle time is an event when teachers and children gather together, often in a circular configuration, conducting joint activities for about 10-30 minutes. Song, talk, music, movement, group-play, storytelling, seeing who is absent, and providing information are common topics of circle time.

Feeling togetherness and experiencing to be part of a group are general

objects of circle time. To the children circle time also provides a possibility to act in front of the others and to be in the centre of everybody´s attention, for instance, when showing things and telling about them.

The object of circle time can also be knowledge-oriented, a theme can be dealt with, for instance, getting to know different musical instruments:

> JYRI (a male student) sits in front of first five, later six children. There is also JYRI´s teacher from the kindergarten teacher college. JYRI asks about different groups of musical instruments. He names some instruments of each group but shows only a recorder and a ´kantele´, a Finnish zithar. Olli and the other children are listening to him looking interested. Getting to know the rhythm instruments is the main topic of this circle time. There are some of them on the table next to JYRI. He takes one or two at a time, shows also pictures of them and asks for their names. The children do not remember all names and some of the instruments they don´t know, for instance, ´guiro´.
> (...)
> Children of maracasses: "That is just like a dagger."
> About castanets: "It looks like a heart, or like a tulip."
> "We have like that, with red and white..."
> Olli is listening to the others. He is not so quick at reacting but he manages to say "triangle" when it is shown.
> JYRI: "Fine, Olli."
> (...) Olli tries to say something more about the triangle, but JYRI himself continues with his programme.
> There is a screen behind JYRI and the children are asked in turn to go behind the screen and play an instrument. The others say the name of the instrument or show its picture when they recognize the sound. The rule is that everybody is allowed to play. Everybody also likes to play in his or her turn. Some children run enthusiasticly to show the pictures of the instruments, but JYRI wishes they sit quietly and listen carefully.

Circle time is very often a teacher-dominated activity but there are examples of children being in charge of the situation:

> Sten and Vibeke are leading circle time. Sten is wearing a batman-outfit. The children are sitting in a circle. The agenda is written on the blackboard. Sten first chooses to sing, and the song is "Hodja fra Pot".
> DORA: "Ooh, that one is difficult but good."

She gets up to get the songbooks. Vibeke and Sten are sitting close to each other. They both join in singing the first verse but the song is long and difficult and soon they both stop singing. Vibeke drops some little thing she has in her hand. Sten picks it up and gives it to her.
The next item on the agenda is sharing-show-and-tell. On the small black rug in the middle of the circle there are laying a number of things that the children want to show and perhaps tell about. Sten stands solemnly with his hands in his waist and looks at the collection. Then he points at something and its owner may start.
Sten, seriously: "Penbox."
He sits down. A girl stands up and shows her penbox. She tells about it, what is inside and what it is used for. She sits down again. There is some disturbance in the circle. One child is still singing "Hodja fra Pot". Amalie who is new in the group wants to draw a picture to put on the black rug. Vibeke sits with her arm around Stens neck and does not look like she is listening. Then Vibeke gets up and points at the next item which is a small dalmatian. The owner of the dog tells that she has got it at Mackeydonalds. Sten is not listening, he is sitting and plays with the piece of chalk, throws it up in the air and catches it again. It is infectuous, Vibeke takes another piece of chalk and also starts throwing. DORA asks Sten to continue the circle time and the next item is picked out.
(...)
Sten and Vibeke sit and tease each other, they giggle. Sten tickles her and Vibeke shakes her body. Sten puts his head in her lap and he is allowed to do that. There is still unrest in the group.
DORA: "But, Sten and Vibeke, was it not you who were leading the circle time?"

Sten is very serious in his role as a leader and seems to enjoy the task. Looking at the communication between Sten and Vibeke, one can see that to them the object of the activity is not only to be in charge of circle time but also to show affection for each other. Cirle time is an activity most often structured by the teacher with social and educational aims. It is important to distinguish between the teacher´s and the different children´s perspective of what happens. They may all have different objects in relation to their different ways of particpating in the activity.

Gymnastics

Gymnastics is an activity where a group of children is involved in movement, often in an organised way under supervision of an adult. Very common themes in gymnastics seem to be the apparatus track, using peabags and parachutes and playing sport games. The next excerpt is from the apparatus track:

> The girls move on the track from one station to the next. The next station are the wall bars. When climbing up, one girl has a pea-bag on her head, and when she has reached the top, she throws the bag down into a ring. JYRI (a male student) explains the game thoroughly although the girls no doubt already know the game. Henna begins to climb on the back-side of the wall bars, beside the wall. Someone tells JYRI that the hall is empty, they could take the hall because it is bigger. JYRI decides not to go, because everything is planned for this smaller room.
> Milka: "[I have] always so good throws."
> Henna: "So do I."
> Also JYRI says now and then: "Well, you have very exact throws."
> Once Henna throws the bag beyond the ring. One of the girls suggests that she could move the bag inside the ring. Henna does not want that.
> JYRI shows how to go under the hurdles. After that the skittles ought to be knocked down. This ought to be done from the distance of one meter. The task is too easy for the girls. Thus, Henna seems to make the task more demanding by putting up the fallen skittles in a perfect pattern, trying to find equal distances.
> Essi irritated: "How long does it take?"
> Henna does not react but goes on as before.
> JYRI advises that one must take turns, only one girl can be in one point at a time, especially on the wall bars. This rule does not interest the girls, they only go two together on the wall bars, one on the front side up, the other on the backside down.
> Soon also JYRI praises: "That looks fine!"

In gymnastics the children are aiming at controlling their body, being able to balance and coordinate and to be able to feel "I can control, I can manage any situation." It is also an opportunity to test one´s limits. Children are asked in different ways to walk around with peabags on their head to balance. They show each other how well they are performing. It also gives

the child a possibility to perform and to show him- or herself in front of the others, to be an object for him- or herself.

The object of activity might also be coordinating and cooperating within the group, like when the children jointly are playing with parachutes. The children are very much enjoying this joint activity:

> ELLA and ANDERS unfold a large bright coloured parachute, 10 meters diameter. The children surround the parachute. Everyone takes one or two handles at the edges and are asked to pull the parachute outwards.
> ELLA: "Now we will make it lift. I will count to three and then we raise our arms. One, two, three!"
> They all raise their arms and the air coming under the parachute makes it lift.
> ELLA: "We´ll do it once more."
> They all raise their arms with much laughter and enthusiasm.
> ELLA: "Next time it lifts we go under it and say: 'Hello Turtles!' (Turtles is the name of the group) One, two three."
> They all go under the parachute and scream: "Hello Turtles!"
> The same activity is repeated. Now they all stay under the parachute. The children are laughing loudly and delightedly and run around under the parachute.
> ELLA: "Now we are going to use a ball."
> All children scream: "Yeeaahh!"

To have fun and to enjoy moving around are other important features in gymnastics and movement. An object of the activity is also to follow rules and instructions, for instance, to listen to the sound of a drum and knowing when to run from corner to corner. There are several examples where the children are very attentive and try to listen very carefully to instructions given. In this case to be able to do as the others and thus be part of the group is important. Sometimes this comes close to competing where the children compare their abilities with each other.

The role of the adult is organising and directing the activity. The object of gymnastics for the adult is to carry through what has been planned to do with the children. Sometimes the children get bored because they have to wait in line or they find the tasks not challenging enough. Then they try to make it more interesting, challenging or exciting, or make use of time while

waiting. They remain active subjects even in activities led and strutured by the adults.

Drawing, painting and handicrafts

Activities like drawing, painting and handicrafts are also frequent in day care centres. They could be named semi-structured activities and they are either child-initiated or adult-initiated. Quite often as in the example below one child decides to paint and then other children follow and also want to draw and paint.

Oskar: "I want to draw."
While waiting for LENA to provide him with drawing-paper he plays around with a golden-colour pen and a silver-colour pen.
André comes and sits next to Oskar: "I also want to draw."
Oskar starts drawing with a golden-colour pen. He is drawing very concentrated and commenting what he is doing.
Oskar: "This is a football."
André: "When have you finished with the golden-colour pen?"
Oskar: "Have you finished with the silver?"
They exchange pens and both of them are drawing very concentrated.
Oskar counts something he has been drawing.
André: "Are you drawing a dragon?"
Oskar: "Yes."
André: "Is it dangerous?"
Oskar: "Look!"
Oskar makes a gesture with his hand to show in what way the dragon is dangerous.
Oskar: "My dragon does not have any feet. They do not have feet."
Oskar and André continue talking about their drawings. Herman also wants to draw. He sits at the table and starts drawing.
André to Oskar: "This is a jellyfish! It is going to eat all of them."
Oskar (thoughtfully): "Jellyfish cannot eat."
Oskar takes several colour pens at the same time and paints. He is very concentrated in his work.
Oskar takes a new colour pen and says: "Look at this!"
Again he takes a new pen and says: "Look at this!"
And again: "Hey, look at this!"
Oskar is drawing and painting intensively. Now and then he looks to see what André is doing but returns quickly to his own painting.

The children are very often commenting each other´s paintings and also helping each other. The object of the activity is to create and make a picture but also to try and understand things, which is what Oskar and André are doing when talking about what a dragon looks like. Another element is that drawing stimulates the imagination and the drawing gives an indication of the fantasy world which the children create.

Of course the children also paint for the sake of painting and experimenting with colours. Sometimes the children can even create masterpieces:

> Tine makes a fantastic piece of art one day outdoors using all the plastic toys for outdoor activities. The big sandpit is surrounded by several hundreds of circular poles and Tine puts a plastic toy on each pole. It is all kinds of plastic toys like buckets, spades, boats, lorries in blue, red, green and yellow. It takes her quite a long time and bargaining with the other children to be able to collect 300 plastic toys of all kinds and put them on the poles all around the sandpit. Now she is about to finish, 300 pieces of plastic toys are exhibited around the sandpit.
> ANNE just coming out with some water: "Oh wow ... I must say ... Who did it?"
> Henna, a bit proud: "It was Tine."
> ANNE continues: "It is like a cake. How beautiful!"
> Tine smiles proudly looking at her but does not say anything. Tine stops and observes her masterpiece. But there is not much time to just stand there. The other children - especially the small ones - have great problems keeping their hands away from the exhibits even if Tine is standing just next to them. The older children wait until she is gone. Toys are disappearing all the time and Tine all the time has to go and look for some more plastic toys.

To Tine this is a very creative activity, an aesthetic experience. However, the object of her activity might also be to exhibit, perform and show the others what she can do in order to acquire their attention and respect. Her activity may have an impact on the other children who watch her being creative.

An object of drawing, painting and handicrafts is also to make something in order to be able to give it to somebody. Children are painting in order to

give the painting to another child, or they make a parcel for their mother or for the staff. The question is how this is experienced by the child. Do they do it in order to get acknowledged or is it something implicitly demanded by the adults?

The different objects may all occur during one episode but they may be emphasised differently.

Routine activities

In day care centres time is allocated to different kinds of routine situations like eating, resting and sleeping and getting dressed and undressed. These things have to be done. What happens during routine activities and what can the children make out of it?

To the children the object of the routine activities very often is to relax and to have fun and all kinds of exciting talk and discussions may take place. They include philosophical discussions but also a lot of talk where the children are experimenting and exaggerating like in the following example that takes place at meal time:

Elin and Marta are talking and joking while eating.
Elin: "I have to eat billions."
Marta takes more jam and yoghurt.
Marta: "There are trillions, that is the most."
Elin: "Trillions, millions, billions."
Marta says something that is difficult to understand.
Elin laughingly: "Trillions, billion. Junior is there then more jam."
They laugh at the words.
(...)
Marta: "Junior is in heart. Junius, junico. Michael is in Junior."
Marta: "Michael is in m."
Elin: "Sara is in 1000 billions."
Marta: "Who is Sara?"
Elin: "Nobody at all."
They are happy and laugh. Marta is smiling, Elin is laughing loudly.

Also relations can be negotiated at the snack-time:

Milan: "Paulo may come to my home!"
Oskar: "May I come to your home?"
Milan (nodding): "Mia you may come to my home."
Cornelia: "May I also?"
Milan: "Yes, you may."

The routine situations are moments to day dream and go into one´s own world, especially when it is time to rest. They are also moments to care and show affection for each other, feel warmness and a sense of sharing:

The children go to the entrance hall to dress. Henna is involved in dressing, she does not walk around, she does not discuss with other children and she does not need help. She looks at the other children and listens to the boys beside her. The boys are talking about the games that just finished: "Pauli was indeed good."
(...)
Henna is ready a little later than SusDina. She looks in the mirror at herself, Susanna is beside her. Henna puts her hands around Susanna´s head.
Henna to Susanna: "Your head is smaller."
They begin to measure their heads and wonder if the heads are of the same size, or if Henna´s head is smaller.
As a result Henna and Susanna let out the yell: "Our heads are of the same size!"
Delightedly they begin to hug each other warmly as if fallen in love.

While waiting, for instance, to take a shower, children can turn the waiting time into play or discuss important issues like in the following example where Oskar, Paulo and Milan are waiting to go to the toilet:

The boys discuss lively how lions move. Oskar is showing by walking on four legs.
Milan: "Lions jump."
Oskar very decisively: "No they do not jump, they run."
He explains something about paws on older lions.

In summary, during routine situations, children continue their own activities and they transform the situations into play, they joke with language and engage in social relations.

Work

In the day care centre there are many small work tasks which the children help the adults in or are even responsible of, such as tidying up, setting the table or making the beds after afternoon naps. The work may be included in the daily schedule. In the Finnish day care centre on Monday mornings the children and the educator discussed and decided together about the tasks for the whole week. For that reason the children knew their duties and the adults did not always need to remind them:

> Olli and Juuso are playing "Sandocan", a buccaneer game. JENNI (a kindergarten teacher trainee) comes into the room.
> Immediately Olli says: "Let´s go to make the beds."
> They run into the hall and begin to pile blankets and pillows. A Christmas song can be heard in the room. There are five children doing the job. JENNI is working together with them.
> While working, Juuso makes jokes, he is laughing and forms strange sounds.
> Olli tells Juuso: "Do so that the sign [of the child] can be seen."

First the object of Olli´s and Juuso´s activity is play, then it is work, and finally having a pleasant time and even fun while working. By so doing they combine serious activities with jokes. In the next example the object from the children´s point of view might be rather a kind of play than serious work. The educator lets the children play but she also advises them what to do concerning the work:

> Oskar and other children are asked to tidy up in the cushion room because BELLA (the cleaning woman) is going to wash the floor. André, Marek and Oskar are going to pile up the cushions.
> Oskar to LENA (kindergarten teacher): "André is not tidying up."
> LENA does not comment but starts to help. The children are laughing happily while they are piling up the cushions. Oskar lifts Marek from the floor, puts him down and pats him lightly. Then he holds his head gently under a few cushions. Marek laughs and runs away. Oskar leads him back to the cushions and puts Marek´s head on them. It is a kind of play where Oskar decides.
> Oskar to Marek: "Wake up!"
> They both laugh loudly. LENA comes into the room and wonders whether they are playing or tidying up. Marek turns around and starts

marching. Everybody is laughing and Oskar pushes Marek.
Marek to LENA: "Oskar thinks I am a cushion!"
The play continues. Oskar grabs hold of Marek and pretends to hit him against the cushions. Oskar is laughing until he is almost exhausted. André piles the cushions next to them but is still part of the play. Marek is on his way out of the room but is brought back by LENA. Oskar hands over cushions to LENA who helps to pile them up. LENA tells the children in which order to get the cushions. Oskar helps LENA and fetches cushions but at the same time the play continues.

Not all work is nice, but it must be done. In the following example the object of Olli´s and Juuso´s activity is to work seriously. They are involved in the task, but their words - and facial expressions - show that they rather would do something else:

Olli and Juuso have just been making the beds together with some other children and JENNI. They hasten back into the group room where they had been playing the 'Sandocan' game. The toys are still on the floor.
Juuso: "Let´s tidy up." (JENNI might have reminded them of that?)
Olli: "Yes."
Juuso: "Dull."
Nevertheless, the boys begin to collect their toys.

The children need not always carry their responsibility alone. Sometimes the adults help the children, like in the following where the object of the activity is just the work, tidying up:

JYRI (a male student) enters the group room where Olli and Saku are playing: "Little by little you can begin to finish. There will be a meeting here."
The boys begin to assemble the toys into the case very quickly. Nobody has asked them to do that.
Olli: "Hi, now it is enough with the fight (meaning 'with the fighting play')."
Saku leaves the room and Olli remains gathering the toys.
Olli to JYRI: "Saku ought to help, but now he doesn´t."
JYRI: "I can help."
They do the rest together.

Just like in routine activities, the children understand the object of work activities, but they create their own situation and play. This means that they have other objects as well.

In summary, when studying objects in work as well as other "less free" activities in the day care centres, we found that the children construct their own world just like in role play. This is true also for the activities initiated by adults. The children take initiatives when they need to and see possibilities for that. They bring their fantasy into the situation and connect the ongoing activity to their own way of thinking. They elaborate social relations when they include or exclude others. Thus, the educational and social aim of the teacher is expanded by the children who create their own meaning.

Relations between children

According to our general assumptions the child is seen as a subject, who creates and changes his or her world and culture, and thereby contributes with qualities to his or her own life. But to see the child as a subject he or she is not seen as a separated, solitary person, but as part of and dependent on the social world.

Solitary activity

Life in a day care centre is a life together with other children and adults, and most of the time the child carries through his or her activity together with other children. Usually the child freely and intentionally looks for other children, but we also see children in a non-shared or solitary activity. Obviously it is important for the child to have possibilities to be alone, to take a rest or to carry through an activity on his or her own. The reasons for wanting to be alone can be countless. However, the child's solitary activity is related to the material and ideal world, and through that also related to other people, for instance, when the child is inspired by other children or adults.

In the example below Fanny all by herself carries through a play she probably has played earlier together with friends:

> Fanny lifts up the basket from the turtle's pram and carries it to the hall, where she starts talking to the turtle. In a tender way she holds the basket and sings for turtle.
> She asks the turtle: "Would you like to sit? Or what are you going to do?"
> She takes the basket, looks at the turtle while she mumbles for herself. Now she watches the observer, then she sings a little and runs to the doll's corner.

Oskar creates a similar quiet situation in the playground:

> Oskar grasps some sand, holds it between his hands and lets it seep between his fingers. Again and again he repeats the process. Then he puts some sand on a triangle close to the swings. He stirs the sand and fills up with more sand. He is very concentrated and completely unaffected by all the children around him. Again he returns to the sandpit, picks up more sand and creates a little heap of sand at the edge of the sandpit.

Both examples show children engaged in activities they have chosen themselves and which seem to be important to them. In their activity they express several concrete manifestations of quality, such as involvement and concentration.

Shared activity among children

In different activities being a subject is expressed in different ways. In a shared process where there is more than one subject, it is of interest to ask: How are the subjects sharing this process? How is the process accomplished? Who is the source of the activity?

When two or more children direct their activity towards the same object, they have a shared activity. Being a subject in a shared activity means that the individual child acts as a subject and is treated like a subject. This is the case when one child gets an idea and is able to realize it, and the other children and adults show an interest in and an understanding of the idea. Sharing implies dialogue and other forms of communication about the idea of the activity[1]. This can be verbal or emotional and is often expressed by mime and gestures involving empathy and initiative. Often the children themselves create a symmetric relation, a subject - subject relation. This is seen in Marcus's and Jan's play:

[1] There are also another interpretations of the concept of sharing, see Matusev (1996).

Marcus: "Look here!"
He places his blue bag on the table, opens it and pours the contents on the table, both small and bigger plastic animals and some cars.
Jan grasps a tiger and declares: "I shall be him."
Marcus bursts out: "No. This is me."
Jan keeps the tiger and stresses: "I got it."
A moment later they build a prison.
Marcus places a car in the garage but Jan declares: "We have no space for more."
He opens a gateway and makes a sound like a siren.
Then he says: "And I have a police car, it is because there are robbers. Yes, there were robbers. Where can they be?"
Jan repeats: "Yes, where can they have the car?"
Marcus suggests: "Here."
Jan: "Sure, this is a prison, a prison car. But where is the prison?".

The boys try to develop a shared understanding of the situation. They make suggestions to each other and negotiate. They show each other things from the bag and they express interest and mutual respect. Here some of the concrete manifestations are expressed, such as joy and friendliness.

Now and then the children have a pause in playing in order to establish a shared understanding, which is seen in the following role play:

Some boys and girls jump up and down in the cushion room.
A boy says: "This is monkey food."
Immediately all children shout: "Bananas, bananas".
They laugh and throw themselves on the cushions.
Oskar: "We pretend these are bananas."
The children continue the monkey play.

In this shared play all the children act as monkeys and by doing so all of them are sources of the activity. They are subjects of their own activity.

Olli and Juhani continue to play, but now they drive motorcycles as 'Biker mice from Mars'.
Olli says: "Biker mice from Mars do not overtake."
Some other boys go to play 'pool cheating'.
Juhani to the boys:"You could be quiet!"
Olli runs around as 'a biker mouse from Mars'.
(...)
Later Olli enters the hall to Juuso and Arttu who are playing at the sand box. All the time Olli has had a compass round his neck, but

now he gives it to Arttu.
Olli to Arttu: "Because the biker mice from Mars do not have a compass."
Olli and Juuso decide to attack the smallest room where Arttu just went.
Olli says: "This (referring to himself) is the one, who has only half face."
After the attack on Arttu, Juuso wants to be attacked.
He advises Olli and Arttu how to attack: "Cry out: 'you are arrested'!"

The shared activity can be carried through in many different forms, but often two or more children together in a creative way develop the activity. This is seen in Sascha's and Mille's play where they inspire each other:

On the playground two girls Sascha and Mille do turns in a rack. Both of them hang with their head down.
Sascha stands up, climbs a box from which she enters the rack and says: "I can do a turn, and also jump down."
Mille nods her head and declares: "Me too."
She starts singing: "Ongi, ongi ongians..." (This is a creative distortion of a Danish children song: Ugh, ugh, Indians).
Sascha falls into the song, but Mille says: "Don't sing that high!"
She herself sings a stanza: "Ugh, ugh, Indians, pees in the bananas."
Now addressed to Sascha she says: "Sascha, this was in Danish."
The children return to the rack.
Sitting at the bar Mille bursts out: "Look at me, without hands!"
She jumps down. Sascha sits down with her head down. Mille looks at her and sits down in the same position.

Besides the activity is shared, the two girls create something together. For that reason we call the relation *creative participation*. Activities where the children inspire each other are seen again and again during the day. The creative aspects are expressed also in the following sequence, where Peter and Jens proceed composing on a well known tune 'Old Mc Donald had a farm':

Peter and Magnus are reading a book together.
Magnus decares: "I shall have bare-foot."
Peter starts singing: "And there was knock here, knock there, everywhere knock... and there was hop here, hop there, everywhere hop... and there was..."
The boys are dancing around singing what they are seeing: "There

were books here, books there, letters here, letters there..."

Being creative means that the children through their own activity change aspects in their world and add new elements to it. The concept of creativity is not reserved only to describe an activity and a result where the content is totally new, something never seen before. That is why it is possible to speak about creativity, when Peter and Magnus use a known tune but change the text.

Very often the children give their imagination a free reign, and with the help of their fantasy they create joy, fun and games. This process resembles play: it is free, process-oriented and creative communication, as seen in the following 'nonsense' dialogue:

> Peter and Magnus are sitting in the sofa.
> Peter says: "Put your slippers in place, no, put your slippers on your own body."
> Magnus: "No, put yourself on yourself."
> Magnus is stamping in the sofa with Peter. They play the clown and in turn they perform.
> Peter: "I went to a cow milking bananas."
> Magnus continues: "I found a banana, which milks pictures."
> Peter laughs: "I went to a cow, which milks Magnuses."

Sometimes the creative and *imaginative participation* is expressed in a way, where the children tease each other. The teasing can be humorous and tough, but also have a wee bit of negativism.

The shared activity has not always a creative character. The children may carry through a very well known activity without any intellectual or emotional challenge. This is seen when the children help with routine activities like setting the table, changing clothes or playing a very well known game. Still such an activity can be very exciting and joyful.

In day care centres we see many shared and creative activities where some children are more enterprising than others. One child may initiate an activity and at the same time appeal to other children for their participation, which may be called *initiating participation*. There are also moments where an individual child's participation in the activity has a reactive character.

In the following example Anja takes the initiative to change the concrete perfume play into fun:

> Two girls, one of whom is Julie, bring out a lot of cups and bowls containing sand which they will use for producing perfume. The kindergarten teacher, FRED, suggests to Anja and Annelise that they should pick daisies from the lawn for their perfume. They set off at once.
> Annelise returns, shouting: "Julie, I have picked flowers for your perfume."
> A little later Anja comes running: "Annelise, come, we must pick flowers!"
> They run out again. Julie stirs in a bowl of water into which they sprinkle the flowers. Anja shouts excitedly.
> Julie: "Try smelling our perfume."
> They sprinkle petals into the bowl.
> "It smells lovely of perfume."
> Annelise: "What do we need, Julie?"
> Anja fools about: "We need coffee and chives."
> She rattles off a lot of other mysterious items. Then Annelise and Anja begin to 'paint' the bench with 'perfume'.
> Anja laughs: "Perfume off, perfume off."
> Julie pours 'perfume' with a shovel. Annelise and especially Anja laughingly make mysterious sounds banging their brushes against the bench. Anja runs inside and applies a lot of real soap to her brush.
> Anja shouts laughingly: "Soap on, soap on."
> She starts to apply it to the bench they 'painted'. Anja turns to run for more, but instead she runs around laughing with Julie and Annelise joining her.

Anja brings in the fun, she creates the painting with the perfume the girls have made from the flowers, and again this activity is also transformed when soap is applied to the bench. Julie and Annelise act less creatively, they do not take crucial initiatives. They join the already ongoing perfume play and by so doing comply with an existing play idea, yet in a very active manner. At the same time they show an open mind to suggestions and ideas produced by the other children participating in the play. Such a kind of shared participation can be called *complying participation*.

Very often a child in a complying participation expresses joy and happiness with being together. In the following example Essi is the source of the activity. Henna's participation is more complying but undoubtedly

she also has a good time with joy and happiness:

> Henna and Susanna begin to roll snowballs, and step by step they come closer to the group of children who are playing 'day care centre'. After a while the children including Henna are laying on the snow with closed eyes having their 'afternoon naps'. Essi, the 'teacher' sits in the corner and is 'reading'.
> Now and then the 'teacher' uses her voice: "Keep silence."
> Two boys ask if they are allowed to take their spades with them into bed. Essi allows that. Later they gather in order to make an 'excursion'.
> Essi asks: "Who will take my hands? There are two good places here!"

A type of interaction which we call *inviting participation* can be seen in the next episode:

> Sanne pushes a car on the traffic top. Lis and some younger children observe her in the doorway. Sanne carries on driving the car, goes into the curve and looks at Lis.
> Sanne to Lis: "You can join in, we are a gang."

The child can not rely on the other children's helpfulness. Sometimes a child, who does not meet attention at the moment, is forced to take the initiative. Thus some children create their own activities in order to be invited into a shared activity. This could be called *self-inviting participation:*

> Six-year-old boys Chris and Hans play rock musicians. They are playing the guitar on cock-horses.
> From the scene Chris screams: "Are you with us?"
> The boys have a break, Sanne looks at them and sits down close to them, holding a cock-horse. Chris tells Hans how to introduce themselves in a TV program.
> Sanne joins the play: "Oh yes, and then we will get medals."
> The boys accept Sanne's participation, and all three together speak about what will happen. The boys speak about how they will fight, and now they show the fight in practice.
> Sanne observes the fight and cries out some suggestions: "Why don't we take them out on deep water and break their arms?"

Because she has the correct attribute, a cock-horse, Sanne gets access to the boys' play. Without verbal expression they accept her participation. Sanne is fascinated by the boys engagement, for instance of Chris's screaming. She is involved, gives suggestions and seems really to be interested in the boys' activity.

In the described sequences the children carried through a creative participation in varied forms. Although some participants were more enterprising than others, in general all children acted as subjects. Both the initiating and the complying participation were accompanied with joy of being together.

Unequal relations

In the day care centre there are also episodes which are marked by conflicts, anger, disappointment or a depressed mood and less by shared joy. In such episodes a child may be treated as an object. For instance, Fanny looks at some girls playing a game with cards and pieces. In order to be involved she sits down on a chair but is neglected by the other girls. Later with the help of an adult she is accepted but immediately when she begins to win, the girls stop the game. She is not treated as a subject and she seems to suffer.

Sometimes one child is too domineering and treats all the other children as objects:

> Two boys Marco and Pelle play 'the labyrinth game', while a third boy Ivar is standing in between them helping both of them.
> Ivar suggests to Pelle: "Now move this one."
> Ivar moves the pon.
> (...)
> Pelle picks up a new card. Ivar wants to look at it but Pelle does not want to show it to him.
> Ivar: "I only want to help."
> Pelle asks Ivar: "Who are you helping?"
> Pelle moves his pon.
> Ivar looks Pelle straight in the eyes and smiles at him, reassuringly: "Do not take this one, but that one, it is very good."

Pelle is going to push a card off from the board.
Ivar: "No, I know, I know."

In a shared activity one initiating child may have a leading role, in which he or she acts in a commanding and domineering way, called *domineering participation*. Domineering children may have lots of interesting ideas, which they implement in a fascinating way. That is why the other children may experience activities carried out by them both as exciting and attractive.

The dominated child participates in a shared activity but mainly he or she carries out the other children's ideas. He or she accepts the ideas of the other and acts in agreement with them. This we call *performing, submitting participation*.

The domineering child does not consider the other child as a resource of ideas in joint play and by dominating, he or she prevents this other child to act as a subject. For the dominated child, the joint activity may lead not only to disappointment but also to exclusion from the group:

Sanne, Lis, Katrine and Klara are sitting around a table drawing. Lis starts to sing a song.
Sanne sits down on a chair asking: "Do you know the song about Rudolf?"
The girls answer: "Oh yes."
Sanne: "Then sit down over there."
Sanne starts singing. The girls join in the song.
Sanne continues: "You remember this one?"
(...)
Sanne: "Then we sing... and when I do like this, we start."
Sanne shows with her hands how to start.
Sanne: "Are you ready? This is a special Christmas song. Here we have my two friends. I want you and you."
She brings Lis and Katrine to the platform. Sanne, Katrine and Lis stand in front of Klara. The three girls stand on the top of a box, and for that reason they look 'down' at Klara.
In an aggressive voice they start singing a Danish children's song: "Spit, Spit I am a backyard cat."
In an accusing manner Sanne looks at Klara saying: "Klara! You must sing!"
Klara does not say anything. She turns to the door.
Sanne cries: "Klara you have to stay."

She makes a pause, and adds: "You are the sweetest, if you stay."
Klara says: "I stay."
She takes a step towards the door and declares: "But only if it [the tape recorder] is not that loud."
Sanne: "Okey, we will turn it down."
Sanne does not turn down the tape recorder.
(...)
Sanne dances on the table. Lis and Klara walk around.
Sanne: "Good, then we stop."
She turns the tape recorder off.
(...)
Klara interrupts saying: "Why should we not have music?"
Sanne looks at her and says: "They who want music must leave."
Klara answers: "I don't want music."
Both Lis and Katrine say: "Neither do I."
Klara says cautiously: "Perhaps Teddy wants music."
Sanne replies quickly: "No".
She talks a little with Teddy and starts to sing: "Two hearts afire, a woman and a man."
Sanne sings on her own.
(...)
Katrine withdraws. She sits down in a box where she is almost completely hidden. Klara stands looking.
Katrine almost shouts: "You just stand there and watch me sulk."
Sanne approaches Klara and Katrine. She grabs Klara's arm and leads her towards the sliding door.
On her way Lis says to her back: "You will not come in again."
Klara stands in the doorway and says into the room: "You will not be invited to my birthday."
Sanne closes the sliding door. Klara stands outside. She tries to open the door and forces herself inside.

In this sequence Sanne has a role in which she organizes the play and decides about what is going to happen. She uses the other girls for her own purposes. Klara on the other hand, shows a performing and submitting participation.

It can be summarized that the children express joy when they share the creative part of a joint activity. Children seem to enjoy what they create and develop together, including the joint process itself. This is apparent from the emotional communication between the children. But as shown in our last example, sometimes the situation can be just the opposite.

Relations between children and adults

Subject - subject relations

To be treated as a subject, the subject - subject relation, is important not only in relations between children, but also between educators and children. Yet, in education in general, as well as in early childhood education there is an asymmetric relation between the educator and the children. The adult is more educated, more experienced, older and has more power than the children. Often he or she is the source of the activity. Thus the relation between children and adults can be described by using the terms subject and object. A main question is, whether the child is treated as a subject or as an object by the adult. Of course, also the child can treat the adult as a subject or object, although we have not looked into that in our study.

Subject - subject relations exist when the educator can take the child's perspective and understands the child in spite of the asymmetric relation. They can also exist when the children and the adult share a task, even though the goals and motives to fulfill the task may differ. But subject - subject relations might also exist when the educator in a way treats the child as an object: being an educator, it is his or her task to promote the child's learning, for instance, by giving new ideas or suggesting different activities. It may be difficult for the educator to meet the child as a subject in such cases, but it can be done, for instance, by developing joint activities where the educator and the child participate out of their real interests.

There is a risk in subject - subject relations, for example that the educator does not take responsibility and is just following the child. In education, the role of the educator is to facilitate developmental processes: the child should not be left completely by his or her own. The educator must help the child by creating possibilities to make choices, by showing when to use help from others, and by giving the child space for his own activities without adults.

Sanne, Lis and Klara play with cars on a big table on which things like roads, traffic lights and houses are painted. Sanne drives her car.
A male educator FREDRIK enters the door.
Sanne asks him to join: "You can have this car, or that."
FREDRIK: "Then I prefer this one."
He takes a car and tells the girls about his own childhood and a car he loved.
He takes his car (...) and declares: "I should like to go to McDonalds."
He orders a hamburger and a milkshake from Sanne.
(...)
This gives Sanne the idea to produce money. She cuts some pieces of paper. Lis asks Sanne to pass her a piece of paper.
Sanne anwers: "No, you must not."
Lis to FREDRIK: "Yes I am allowed to have a paper, am I not?"
In a humorous way FREDRIK answers: "Why not ask the manager?"
Sanne gives the paper to Lis.

In the example the educator tries to understand the girls, their play and mutual relations. On the one hand Sanne dominates Lis, but at the same time the educator realizes that they also try out a power game where he does not want to interfere. For that reason the educator does not establish a subject - object relation by scolding Sanne. Instead, by using the term 'manager' he hopes to help the girls to clarify their mutual relations. That means he focuses on norms and values without seeing the girls as objects.

In the day care centre the children carry through many activities, where the adults do not participate directly but observe the children and support them with ideas and materials. There are also many examples in which the adults introduce activities and tasks in order to challenge the children with knowledge and new ideas. Sometimes children and adults have a shared activity, where they direct their activity towards the same object. Although they may have different feelings and thoughts about the collective object, children and adults have a shared understanding of the situation. In such a shared activity both children and adults can experience a close and emotional atmosphere:

Henna goes into the group room where ELINA (a kindergarten teacher student) is playing 'The star of Africa' with Jari. She goes to

sit on ELINA's lap and watches the ongoing play. Two other girls are playing on the loft.
Milka enters the room and starts to talk to ELINA: "It was not that nice to say what Sannena said, [she said] that she just plays alone, was it?"
The children and ELINA begin to discuss in a quiet voice the need to play alone.

Milka starts a discussion about something that may have upset her. The educator takes the problem seriously and all children participate in the discussion in a quiet way. There are also sequences where this kind of closeness is absent. One reason is that there are too many tasks and too few staff members in the day care centres. In the next episode the educator does not have time for individual attention:

Some boys, among others Olli and Juuso, make Christmas presents.
Juuso reminds Olli of an undone task: "The painting!"
Olli goes to the table besides Kyösti and begins to paint.
Olli cries out: "LEENA, LEENA, I am soon almost ready."
LEENA (a kindergarten teacher): "Just take your other hand to help, hold on. Do paint in this way, like you would stroke a cat."
(...)
Olli: "LEENA, is this already ready? LEENA, LEENA, I have painted the bottom."
LEENA quietly to Olli: "And what is done then?"
Then LEENA turns to Juuso.
(...)
Olli: "LEENA, LEENA!"
LEENA turns to Olli and declares: "Wait for a while, Olli, I am helping Saku."

There are no simple methods and direct means to create a shared activity and shared understanding. The educator must search for the child's perspective and try to understand his or her feelings. Although the adult has the power to ask for the child's attention, it is not possible to force the child. Sometimes also a non-shared activity appears, and the child can exclude the adult out of his or her activity:

There are eight girls sitting at a round table playing with plasticine.
One of the girls declares: "I am the big sister."

Also the other girls advertise their roles.
Carina presents the theme of the play: "And this would be pizza and it would be Christmas food."
(...)
Somebody: "I am grandfather. Grandfather can make a pizza."
(...)
Carina adds: "Everybody makes rissole. Who will make rissole?"
An ADULT enters the room asking: "What are you doing?"
A girl answers, obviously of duty.
The children continue doing their 'pizzas' still passing remarks on the product and keeping their roles.
(...)
Again the ADULT tries to enter the girls' play and talk to them.
She asks a girl: "Are you going to do rissoles?"
Another girl answers: "She shall make them for me."
The girl drops her mug, looks at the ADULT who says: "Then you have to pick it up."
The ADULT points at a box and asks: "What is this colour?"
One girl answers: "Red."

The children hardly show any interest in the adult's questions. The example shows that it is not easy to enter the children's world. The adult must have a genuine interest. If the adult just pretends to share the children's interest, he or she will be refused. The children may communicate with the adult because of a sense of duty and because the adult in a way uses his or her power and authority.

A shared activity is not created automatically despite the adult's serious interest in the children and their lives:

Fanny drives the doll's pram and passes BELLA, who is washing-up.
BELLA says: "Hey Fanny!"
Fanny answers: "Hey."
BELLA continues: "Has your doll peed?"
Fanny: "No."
BELLA: "Oh, it is a turtle, what is her name?"
Fanny: "Little-turtle."
BELLA: "Is it a boy or a girl?"
Fanny: "Yes, a he."
BELLA: "Does he have a cold?"
BELLA picks up the turtle: "Is it nice to be a mother to a turtle?"
Fanny: "???"

The girl and the adult communicate in a relaxed atmosphere. The adult tries to establish a dialogue using a topic from the girl's world. However, the activity is not really shared. A shared activity requires a shared understanding where both the child and the adult direct their interests towards the same object.

Sometimes in a shared activity both children and adults contribute to the development of the activity. When the adult and the child together set up new ideas, the activity is not only characterized by being shared but it can also be called creative participation. In the day care centre we find situations, where children and adults together and through alternating initiatives create new ideas and activities:

> Early in the morning Stine enters the door together with her father. DORA goes to meet them. Last week DORA has been on holiday in Turkey, and clearly Stine is happy to see her again. In a hurry Stine runs towards her, showing her a new treasure, a 'slime-animal' shaped as a starfish. Stine walks around with it. With a big smile she splashes it against her own cheek. Happily she shows it to DANIEL, a male educator. Together they count the arms of the toy.
> DORA says: "Actually it is a little yukky (meaning unappetizing)."
> Stine splashes it against the door. Some seconds it sticks, then the arms loosen, one by one.
> DORA: "Aadrr!"
> Stine: "DANIEL, would you like to touch it?"
> DANIEL: "Uhdddrr, how slimy!"
> Stine chuckles and puts it on his arm. The she climbs the sofa to DORA and puts the toy on her shoulder, then on her thigh.
> (...)
> Stine is sitting in the cosy little corner between DANIEL and DORA. She crawls close to DORA asking: "Are you ticklish?"

Stine is fascinated by her 'slime-animal' and the adults act in accordance with her interest. They not only react but through their actions they contribute to create a shared and creative activity. When children and adults succeed to create something together, the children feel good. Through such a subject - subject relation the children experience real respect.

In order to establish a subject - subject relation and a creative participation the adult must radiate an interest for the children's ideas and actions and also present his or her own ideas. In the following episode JOSÉ is

close to the children who play with snow on the playground. He shows his interest and is ready to be involved in the children's activities:

> Pelle has rolled a big snowball all on his own.
> Pelle calls: "Look JOSÉ, come."
> Emilie: "Come and look what Pelle has made."
> JOSÉ: "Oh, how big."
> (...)
> Pedro and Pelle try to roll the ball up a little hill, and Pedro calls: "JOSÉ, can you help us?"
> JOSÉ cries to the children: "Come on, we need help, come Marco!"
> They push the ball uphill and let it go downhill again.
> JOSÉ: "Aaaaaah!"
> Pelle, Ivar, Marco and Pedro clap and mend the ball with more snow.
> JOSÉ suggests: "Now we go uphill again."
> (...)
> A boy asks: "Why not make it bigger?"
> Pelle says: "I will do it by myself."
> Again JOSÉ helps. They roll the ball uphill and now it becomes even bigger. Pelle pushes with his head, everybody pushes.
> (...)
> JOSÉ: "Now we go down with the boll."
> He pushes the ball and laughs: "Here it can stay!"
> (...)
> He lifts Pelle up on the ball, Pelle looks proud.

Both in the episode about the 'slime-animal' and in the above snowball example we see active children with involving adults who are interested in and willing to share the activity. The children are sources of the activity. When children themselves define the starting point they are often highly motivated, which forms good conditions for the activity. When the educator is involved in such activities it is possible for him or her to combine the children's perspective with an educational goal.

In another situation the adult initiates the activity. Through an initiating participation the educator relates his or her goal to the children's motive and interests in order to create a subject - subject relation:

> After lunch JOAKIM starts reading stories to some children sitting in a sofa. Sten and Niels are sitting at the table, talking, but they start whispering because of JOAKIM's storytelling.
> (...)

JOAKIM is a good and spell-binding storyteller. Sten is listening with an open mouth to the story and is biting a piece of paper.
Niels says to Sten: "Sten, I have finished my sandwich."
(...)
Sten and Niels run away with their lunch boxes. When passing JOAKIM Sten is again captured by the story. (...) He forgets to go to the playground, instead he sits down in a corner. Niels asks Sten to follow him. Sten shakes his head and Niels leaves the room. Sten sits down on the table in front of JOAKIM. He lies down on his chest looking at him. When JOAKIM shows the picture Sten gets up and moves a bit closer.

Sten is involved and fascinated by the story. Sometimes however, when the adult initiates an activity the children show no interest, and it is not possible to carry through the activity:

After lunch eight children and GUNILLA walk to the cushion room in order to rest. Each child has his or her own mattress on which to listen to a fairytale from the tape recorder. The children are noisy and troubled.
(...)
A girl tries to take Fanny's mattress. They tumble around.
GUNILLA to the two girls: "What's wrong today? I can't recognize you."
The girls start to jump around. GUNILLA asks the children to be calm.
(...)
The level of noise is increasing.
GUNILLA says desperately: "I can't recognize you. What has happened?"
(...)
Again GUNILLA tries to tell the children to be quiet: "Now everybody calms down. Can we decide what to do?"
At once Fanny declares: "I want to draw."
This she repeats several times. Also some other children say they would like to draw. Fanny and three other girls walk out in order to fetch equipment for painting.

In the example the children are active, they take initiatives, yell and jump around. From the adult's perspective the time of rest should have a calm atmosphere, listening to a fascinating story. The educator makes some attempts in this direction, but fails. Such experiences for the adult may form

the basis of a more domineering and controlling role. However, in this example, the educator expresses her frustration about the situation. By formulating a question about what to do she opens up for the children to take the initiative and they immediately grasp the opportunity. This brings an end to the problematic situation.

Subject - object relations

Those educators, who want to have control of the whole situation and become anxious when loosing control, have a tendency to establish a subject - object relations. Subject - object relations exist when the educator treats the child as a real object, for instance, when he or she determines the goal and the implementation of the task for the child without minding the child's point of view. Here the relation is not justified by an educational aim. It is merely based on the adult's monopoly of power and the use of a top-down treatment:

> JYRI (a student) takes the hoops out and asks the girls "to do something" with them. He does not tell more clearly what they ought to do.
> JYRI: "You could show some tricks."
> The girls try to jump and roll the hoops. Nobody knows exactly what to do, neither JYRI.
> (...)
> Milka suggests to play "Little circus". JYRI thinks that it means jumping through a hoop. The girls mean they would do different things on the mattresses one after the other while the others would look. JYRI does not ask what "Little circus" means. One girl takes pea-bags out and comes to the mattress. JYRI allows only jumping through the hoops. The girls protest and also begin to quarrel with each other.
> Milka: "We don't just jump!"
> JYRI irritated: "You yourself wanted that [Little circus]."
> Henna suggests that they could take the rings and ropes, but JYRI does not accept that.
> JYRI, looking nervous and fed up with the situation: "Let's finish this [Little circus]."

The children are asked to express themselves, but their attempts are not accepted. The adult does not participate in the activity and he rejects the children's ideas because he does not understand them. Their enthusiasm makes him nervous. Not understanding the children and not looking at the situation from the children's perspective, prevents him to establish a subject - subject relation.

In summary, relations between adults and children are similar to those between children. Both have subject - subject and subject - object relations. But there are also differences, which emanate from the asymmetric relation between the adult and the child. There is a risk when educators try to treat the children as their equals in the sense of giving them too much responsibility and forgetting their own. Being an educator presupposes that power is used to promote the child's development. Subject - object relations can be detrimental, when there is no understanding of the child's point of view. Thus, it is important for the educator to be aware of these relations and it is necessary to establish a balance between them.

Conclusions

Our work had several objectives. We wanted to illuminate quality of children's life in the day care centre. We also wished to gain more understandning about the concept of quality. Further, an aim was to contribute to the development of methods for the study of quality in children's life. Finally, we intended to take part in the discussion about quality in early childhood education, and to contribute with educational suggestions.

Quality of the child's life in the day care centre

We used the child's own contribution and endeavour to create quality in his or her life as our point of departure. We refrained from making an attempt to produce a general definition of quality in education but committed ourselves to a more concrete search for quality in the child's life in day care centres.

We observed situations and activities with different objects, different ways to participate in them, and different relations between children as well as between children and adults. In several of these episodes we found concrete manifestations of quality such as happiness and involvement. We also found a number of characteristics of life in day care and themes that occurred across different activities, that are descriptions of the child´s life and are important as a background to understand what quality is.

In the following example, the objects of the participants, the relations between the children and between children and adult are analysed together. It shows concrete manifestations of quality, complexity, quick change of activities and multidimensionality in children's life in day care:

> The children are in the cushion room with ELLEN (child care attendant) who is reading a book for them. Pelle declares that he does not want to stay any more but wants to play the game with sheep and

foxes. The teacher does not protest or try to persuade him or other children. All the children leave and the teacher picks up the books. Pelle is standing in front of the shelves in the dining room, the other children have already taken out different games. Pelle is looking for the game with the sheep and foxes and ELLEN takes it out for him. Pelle sits down at the round table by the window. A somewhat younger boy Max is watching him.
(...)
Pelle puts all the pieces on the board in a systematic way, row by row. He has a serious look on his face and he is very concentrated. Every now and then he looks at Marie and Max. ELLEN is also sitting at the table and watches. A girl passes with a yelling laser pistol in her hand, Pelle turns around and looks. ELLEN puts on the sheep on the board. Max moves one of the sheep.
Pelle: "No, you cannot jump over everything."
He pats Max to make him more attentive. They discuss the rules and the issue what it might be to be eaten. Pelle sits on a chair while Max is laying on the table, talking.
Pelle: "Now I will eat you! No, I am only joking."
Max moves one of the sheep.
Pelle says to Max: "No (meaning 'you cannot move in that way'), then I cannot stand there."
Max: "Then I cannot jump over you."
Pelle: "No, dookiedookiedook!"
He has a fox in his hands and lets it fly through the air with his hands like an airplane.
Pelle: "These two jump on him and then we eat him."
Max: "What, how..."
Pelle: "One can do that."
Max: "No, yes..."
Pelle: "It is almost like play. I start."
Edit calls from the cushion room for Marie who is sitting at the table. Pelle looks at her, goes to the other room, looks at the children who are jumping and dancing in the hut. Then he returns to the game. Max is laying over the table.
Pelle: "Then I butt you."
ELLEN to Max: "Sit down."
Max does not hear her. ELLEN puts him on the chair properly. Pelle and Max play war with the foxes and sheep, they make a lot of sounds.
"Tjiiiii, brrrrr."
Ivar: "Are you just playing or are you playing the game?"
The boys do not answer.
Max: "Will I be eaten... no."
They pick out all the sheep from the board.
Pelle: "Beeeeer."
ELLEN: "Do you know how to play the game seriously?"

Pelle: "Yes."
He puts the game back on the shelf.

The episode starts during circle time when Pelle says that he wants to leave circle time and play a game instead. Pelle takes the initiative and his object is to play the game. ELLEN does not protest, she lets Pelle decide what to do. Pelle initiates an activity and all the children follow his example and start to play games. To be able and to be allowed to decide is one aspect of quality.

Pelle is very concentrated while putting up the pieces. Concentration is one of the concrete manifestations of quality. The object of the activity of handling the pieces is to prepare for the game. Another boy Max is watching. Pelle and Max start to play the game without saying anything. Max is allowed to join in the game. Pelle talks with Max about the rules of the game and protests about Max's move. The object is to play the game and to follow the rules. Pelle touches Max to draw his attention. Here Pelle's object is to play the game.

After talking about the rules Pelle skips the game, he does not bother any more about how the pieces should be moved and starts to play with them. This can be interpreted as that Pelle understands that Max is too young to play according to the rules, so he changes the setting. The game changes into play with the pieces, that become airplanes. In this way the relation remains symmetric. The object of Pelle is to play with Max. Another interpretation is that Pelle looses interest in the game, either because of Max´ inability or because his main object was the constructive part of the game, to put up the pieces.

Some of Pelle´s peers are sitting around the tables in the same room and some are playing in the next room. Pelle keeps track of what the others are doing. Thus, an object of Pelle is to be part of the larger group. It seems to be important to the children to know what happens in the other groups parallel to their own play. They develop a capacity to keep track of simultaneous processes. The teacher respects them and they are not reproached for not fully concentrating on what they are doing.

Others around the table from time to time comment Pelle´s and

Max´game and ask what they are doing. This means that both the adult and the other children are taking the perspective of Pelle and Max, trying to understand the object of what they are doing. Their interest is positive and full of respect. The boys, or at least Pelle, show that they are aware of the change of the game into play. ELLEN also may have an educational purpose with her question about the rules, to teach the rules. During the whole episode ELLEN treats the children as subjects, she respects their activities. This produces quality.

One of our general assumption was that the human being creates and changes his or her world and culture and thereby him- or herself together with other individuals. This was found not only in play and play-like activities but also in all activities during the day, often realized by means of fantasy, drama, humour, play with words and numbers. In a broad sense this is the children´s own culture. The concrete manifestations of quality are present in these situations. The child is not a subject alone but is creating something together with other children. The concrete manifestations are lacking if the child is an object of another child who behaves in a commanding and domineering manner.

The children's fascination with 'dramatic' events in play might develop into an interest in knowledge related to the theme in the play. The children also seem to be interested in mastering aspects of the adult's culture, they are for instance, attracted by reading, counting and working. This interest appears during meals, circle time, play, and other types of activity. All that is needed is the attention and interest of other children. This creates a warm atmosphere with jokes and laughter. The staff may play an active role, thus supporting the children's development.

Being with other children in different activities is an important feature of quality. The children tried to establish joint activities even when there were problematic relations between them. The positive emotional relation between children can be called friendship and develop into love. This is possible also in the relation between a child and an adult. In order to develop this relation the understanding attitude of the adult is most important.

Also a situation when the child is on his or her own and seemingly doing

nothing, may be of high quality. Respect for the child is essential, and it is necessary for the educator to take the child´s perspective in order to be able to judge the situation and decide to interfere or not.

From our observations we conclude that the concrete manifestations of quality appear in certain circumstances that can be related to the way of participating - being a source of the activity, creative or complying participation - and to the type of relation between the participants (being treated as a subject). Under these circumstances the type of activity seems to be of minor importance since the children find and create their own meaning in the activities and change them. The possibility to do so is an important aspect of quality.

Our conclusions are based on examples of day care centres considered to be of good quality and with well educated staff. In the examples where 'bad' quality was seen, mostly unexperienced staff or students were involved. Our observations are in accord with the findings of Bertram, Laevers and Pascal (1996) about "teacher style", the quality of the interaction between teacher and child. It is almost self evident that the quality of the staff is related to the quality of the children´s life in day care.

The concept of quality of life

It is impossible to describe and measure quality of life in an objective way without reference to values, either "absolute, eternal" values or those that are adhered to in a certain society. The concept of quality refers to a judgement on a scale ranging from good to bad. It may also refer to judgements on a variety of scales of physical, intellectual, aesthetic and moral quality and furthermore to degree of happiness and need satisfaction (Nordenfelt 1991).

In our study both objective and subjective aspects are discussed. We agree that both are important to give a complete picture and we also think that several different scales are needed. While most earlier studies of quality in early childhood education focused on objective conditions, we focused

on a few subjective aspects of quality. In our study we focused on the well-being of the child, which incorporates also physical aspects, the intellectual quality, harmony, satisfaction and happiness as well as experience of meaning. This implied that we had to make interpretations about them.

We studied only a small part of the life situation of children in day care and without trying to look into their total life situation as a background to their experiences in the day care centre. This puts a limit to our conclusions which together with the focus of the study are relative to current values in society, to the aims of child care in our respective countries and our own understanding of quality.

In a way, this may seem to produce a circular argument, starting out from our own assumptions, using them as criteria for quality and then describing these. However, our contribution consists of not merely describing the existence of concrete manifestations of quality, but also of the circumstances in which they appear. That is, we make a link between subjective expressions of quality and objective conditions. This forms a connection to quality of education. The conditions where quality appears are analysed in depth: the activities, the objects of the activities, ways of participation and the relations between participants. We found that the children themselves created these conditions in the centres we have studied. This means the children are active co-creators of their quality of life.

One more problem concerning quality is connected with the choice of perspective: quality for whom? The observations were directed towards one of the children at a time and interpretations of the situation were made from the perspective of this target child, even though the concrete manifestations of quality are described of the other children as well. We have to discuss whether quality can exist if the target child is happy on the account of other children, or if two girls strengthen their friendship tie by not allowing the target girl to feel as part of their group. Do we regard quality of life as a private or as a collective good? This question leads further into a discussion of moral judgement and contemporary ethics (see, e.g., Benhabib 1992). The educational programme for child care ought to give more guidance in this matter.

Methodological questions

In the beginning of the study we had methodologically rather ambitious aims (Berg-de Jong et al. 1993, pp. 7-9). Originally there was an idea to compare practices in different countries and different settings but very soon we decided to focus on the phenomenon of quality at the cost of comparisons. For a comparative study our economical and time-related resources were not sufficient. We changed the design and used each other's observations as a joint material. This brought some problems in analysing the material, since only the researcher who has collected the data - or rather *constructed* the data (see Kindermann and Valsiner 1989) - knows the environment and the context of the situation observed. Each researcher encloses of course also his or her personal biases, blocks, assumptions and knowledge structures into the research, and into the analysis (see Barott et al. 1996). We had frequent discussions about this during the first phase of the project, but we did not have opportunities enough to discuss this problem in the final phase. Thus analysing and interpreting the episodes on one's own was not unproblematic although we, later on when consulting each other, could come to an agreement.

Moreover, we first aimed at combining a variety of methods. This turned out to be impossible as already mentioned earlier. We could not make full use of the interviews of the staff and the children. Further, while observing without a deeper knowledge and experience of the life of the target day care centres we doubtlessly missed to observe, for instance, some of the concrete manifestations of quality. These experiences convinced us that ethnographic methods with participant observation, although being time-consuming and psychologically demanding, would give a more valid understanding of children's life and its quality. Probably a selection of day care centres with less high quality might have given us other information and understanding of the phenomenon examined. Yet we think that within the limits of the research we found significant information of what constitutes quality.

The reason not to readdress the shortcomings that we noticed during the

pilot phase of the research process was mainly pragmatic. We had to adapt our ideas and their realization to reality of the spare-time research project.

In our opinion the most important methodological contribution of our study is the model of analysis. The model can be applied to research on quality of life not only in day care but in other educational settings as well. In addition, it may help educators to investigate and reflect on their own work. The model brings out aspects of social life that we believe are essential to be considered both in the development and the education of human beings.

Educational reflections

From our analysis several broad educational questions arise, which are connected to what kind of educational culture we aim. Our reflections are related to educational objectives and they are valid not only in early childhood educational practice, but in early years teacher education and in early childhood policy making as well.

From activity to democracy

We have shown that one important characteristic of children's life in day care centres that in and by their joint activity the children create their culture and, through that, important conditions for their own life. In our opinion, this capacity which children exhibit is important to consider in reflections concerning curricula for early childhood education. Apparently, in Nordic day care centres of good quality the child's own activity receives space and is supported in a way that may result in the development of an action competence. From an educational theoretical view the development of action competence means that the children will regard themselves as persons, who on basis of knowledge can influence their social surroundings. Here we see a disposition for development of competence for democracy, as we not only understand democracy as civil rights, but also as the individual's will and competence to participate in social life and processes. This is an important

part of the educational objectives. By supporting the children's action competence, we may educate them to function in the larger society as active and critical citizens, and this in the long run means to educate them for the transformative action in the interest of creating a truly democratic society (see Etzioni 1968).

From imaginative to concrete

To a great extent the object of the activity of the children concerns pretended situations, figures and things. The children develop a mental construction and in their activity they approach the concrete, real life situations and play material with their fantasy.

We question whether the close adherance to the concrete level incurrent education of young children corresponds to how children really think and learn. In our opinion, the movement from an imaginative to a concrete level might be included as an element in the curriculum. The children demonstrate a general ability to master situations where symbols and signs are involved, and it should be possible to make use of signs and symbols in a more goal-directed way. We do not propose a formal and structured use of numbers and letters, but in general to stimulate the children to create their own mental constructions. The educational objective is to help the children to investigate and develop a more elaborated understanding of what lies behind the outside appearance of the object. In accordance with Aidarova (1982) the mental construction works as a means of making generalizations of the qualities discovered.

Dialogue between adults and children

A major feature in daycare is that children explore their world together in the sense that they are subject together. We would like to make a parallel along these lines and suggest that child and adult together could become subject in a joint activity of exploring the world.

Through history several educational theories have stressed the importan-

ce of teacher's and learner's joint activity. Already Socrates emphasized the dialogical method. In our time, among others, Freire (1972) has stated that the educator and the child enter into a subject-subject relation through which they focus on a shared object. The character of the dialogue can also be described in accordance with Habermas' non-controlling communication (Habermas 1984-1987). We propose that this kind of joint activity becomes an element in our reflections concerning curricula for early childhood education.

The above described educational objectives and principles highlight an important dimension in early childhood education, namely the development of democracy and the development of action competence through participation in public discourse by the rising generation.

Concluding remarks

With this, our project has come to an end. It gave us the opportunity to be subjects of our own activity which gave us joy, a good atmosphere and life-long friendship. It has given us great opportunities for learning and it has opened our eyes to a multitude of questions that we were not able to deal with. For instance, we did not discuss the gender problemacy, neither did we study conflicts, norms and rules, nor the development of friendship, the creation of a positive social atmosphere and feelings of togetherness. We think these are important questions for further research.

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